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ABSTRACT

A study critically reviewed 14 dissertations that explore adult women's perspectives on their learning in higher education. The dissertations were examined using two levels of analysis: descriptive and critical/comparative. The studies varied considerably in the aspect of learning or learning experiences that they examined. Twelve focused on adult women undergraduates. The theoretical perspectives and methods used were diverse. Six cited explicitly feminist scholarship as part of their literature review, although they varied in the extent to which feminism was identified as a major aspect of their conceptual framework. The research methodology used in all studies, with one exception, was qualitative or combined qualitative and quantitative methods. Issues of identity were pervasive in women's narratives of their learning experiences. One study investigated adult women students' preferences for different modes of learning, using the distinction between separate and connected knowing. One study focused specifically on minority women. The following concerns arose from this research: the lack of any coherent line of research on women's learning, little incorporation of a gendered analysis into the studies, need for further research that involves more diverse groups of adult women, and adult women's experience of being an "outsider" in higher education. (Contains 20 references.) (YLB)

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NARRATIVES OF ADULT WOMEN'S LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM DISSERTATION RESEARCH

(Paper Summary: Draft Version)

by Elisabeth Hayes & Daniele Flannery

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NARRATIVES OF ADULT WOMEN'S LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM DISSERTATION RESEARCH

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Introduction

Adult women are filling higher education classrooms in increasing numbers. As their presence grows on campus, their learning needs and preferences should have increasing importance for educators and researchers in higher education. Belenky et al's (1986) *Women's Ways of Knowing* has spawned a popular belief that women have distinctive orientations to knowing and learning that may differ from those of men or from more traditional age students. However, in an earlier analysis, we found few published studies that provided empirical support for assertions about adult women's learning in higher education (Hayes & Flannery, 1995). Much of the existing literature consisted of program descriptions, exhortions on how to teach women, or studies of factors that interfere with women's enrollment or cause them to drop out. In particular, studies that investigated women's own perspectives on their learning experiences were almost nonexistent. As Edwards (1993) observed, most researchers "approach the subject from the perspective of 'education' rather than that of mature women students . . . [studies] are concerned with the interests of educational institutions - reaching and retaining more students" (p. 9). A focus on the interests of educators may lead to a lack of understanding of issues and experiences that are particularly important to women learners themselves. Women's subjective experiences seem particularly valuable as a source of information in the study of something as complex and personal as learning.

The limitations of published research on women's learning led us to a search for other potential sources of information. Dissertations represented a less accessible yet substantial body of research that might yield relevant studies. The overall goal of this study was to critically review dissertation studies that explore adult women's perspectives on their learning in higher education. Specific objectives for the study included:

1. to determine the nature of dissertation research on adult women's learning in higher education
2. to identify studies that investigate women's learning from the persepctive of the learner; i.e., women's lived experience of learning
3. To synthesize and analyze findings from these studies
4. To suggest implications for further research and practice

Methodology

Dissertations for the study were identified through a search of *Dissertation*

Abstracts from January 1982 through January 1995. Various combinations of the descriptors women, higher education, adult education, and learning were used to obtain abstracts of potentially relevant studies. These descriptors yielded hundreds of entries that were reviewed in several stages. First, we examined the abstracts and eliminated dissertations that did not focus on learning. These included research on women as educators or administrators (not on learners), program development, and teaching practices.In a second stage, we reviewed the remaining abstracts and selected studies that dealt with women's learning in any higher education setting, including community college and two year college programs as well as four year institutions. In the next stage, research specifically on adult women was identified. We included dissertations that focused on women over the age of twenty-five (a common definition in the adult education literature) or that focused on adult women as defined by the author of the study. Studies that focused only on traditional age women students, and those that did not delineate age differences were not included. Finally, we identified resarch that investigated the subjective experience of learning from the perspective of the women learners themselves. Studies that focused on delineating characteristics of women learners, assessing discrete variables relating to their learning, and "measuring" outcomes of learning were not included. We did include a few studies that combined quantitative measures with qualitative interviews, and one study using learning style measures that seemed particularly pertinent to the focus of our review.

A total of 14 dissertations met these criteria, were available through interlibrary loan, and were included in our analysis. This may seem like a very limited number of studies, based on the large number of studies initially identified through the descriptors. One reason for the large number of studies that we did not include is the vague, all-inclusive way that "learning" is used as a descriptor, applied to a wide variety of topics beyond the process or experience of learning itself. As we conducted the search, it quickly became apparent that the nature of the descriptor system would make it difficult to locate with certainty all relevant dissertations. While we used a rigorous process of screening abstracts, we may not have located all pertinent studies. In addition, we were unable to obtain a few potentially useful studies through interlibrary loan. Accordingly, we do not present our findings as a comprehensive analysis of the dissertation data base on adult women's learning in higher education. Our main purpose was to use the data base to assess the general nature of dissertation research and to identify emerging themes and findings.

The 14 dissertations that met our criteria were examined using two levels of analysis: descriptive and critical/comparative. In the descriptive stage of analysis, we summarized conceptual/theoretical perspectives, research methods, characteristics of women participants, and key findings for each study and for the sample of studies overall. In the critical/comparative stage of analysis, which is still in progress, we are analyzing the nature of supporting evidence for the findings and identifying similarities as well as contradictions among findings from different studies.

The Nature of the Dissertation Research

A brief description of the 14 studies is suggestive of the nature of dissertation research conducted on adult women's learning. The studies varied considerably in the aspect of learning or learning experiences that they examined. These included the process of deciding to return to school, women's psychological development and its relation to learning experiences, learning styles, significant learning experiences, preferred ways of knowing, motivation and learning, reactions to different teaching methods and formats (including distance education and a "connected classroom"). A majority of the studies (12) focused on adult women undergraduates. One study included both undergraduate and graduate women (Delton, 1993), and one study included only graduate students (Wall, 1991). One study involved a comparision of traditional and nontraditional age women students (Vitols, 1985). Two of the studies focused exclusively on minority women (Moore, 1990; Shoemaker, 1993). Three additional studies included at least one minority women in their research sample (Horowitz, 1994; Lapaglia, 1993; May, 1992).

The theoretical perspectives and methods used in these studies were diverse. Six of the 14 authors cited explicitly feminist scholarship as part of their literature review, though they varied in the extent that feminism was identified as a major aspect of their conceptual framework. The work of Belenky et al (1986) and Gilligan (1982) were cited in many studies as important conceptual models providing support for the distinctive nature of women's learning. Only two studies (Saltonstall, 1989; Silver, 1991) built directly on and attempted to test concepts from Belenky et al's work. Other conceptual source material included psychosocial developmental literature, learning style theories, theories of adult learning such as andragogy and perspective transformation, and other literature specific to the particular study's topic.

Due to our focus on studies that explored women's own perspectives, the research methodology employed in all studies, with one exception, was qualitative or combined qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative research methodology was described in diverse ways, including qualitative interviewing, indepth interviewing, oral history, life history, narrative, heuristic inquiry, phenomology and other methods. It was not always clear how these methods were distinctive when research approaches were compared across studies. While it is not our intent to do a detailed critique of research methods, we will address some issues related to methodology and research on women's learning later in our discussion.

An interesting aspect of a few studies was the personal significance of the research for the researcher and the researcher's role in the study. For example, in her study of reentry women, Horowitz (1994) noted that her own autobiography was "woven" throughout the study, and she does interject her own experiences (as a teacher of reentry women) throughout the dissertation. Furst (1994) states "how to approach the problem of elicting answers [to her research questions] that will tap a level of meaning deeper than the satisfaction of emotional or intellectual curiosity is another matter. For that is what I set myself to do in order to make my dissertation more

than a purely academic exercise, and in turn, to have my own sojourn in school make sense" (p. 10). Shoemaker (1993) identifies with the women she interviewed: "their transforming became mine, and in some way we knew each other and ourselves better for it" (p. 1). The topic of women's learning in higher education may likely have had personal significance for other authors who did not acknowledge it in their study. Such comments suggest that the researchers' desire for self-understanding may affect the research in significant ways. In addition, they highlight how the dissertation process itself may be a potentially rich focal point for studies of women's learning in higher education, including learning related to self.

Women's Learning: Illustrative Findings

The great diversity of topics studied, combined with the relatively small number of dissertations in our final data base, makes it difficult to derive generalizations about women's learning from these studies. Rather than attempting to summarize findings across studies, we will use several studies to illustrate some findings that we found to be particularly noteworthy in suggesting new perspectives on women's learning.

Women's self-identity and higher education experiences. Issues of identity are pervasive in women's narratives of their learning experiences, both in and outside of formal educational settings (Flannery & Hayes, 1996). In her dissertation, Furst (1994) explored the relationship between adult women's sense of self and their perceptions of their experiences as students in higher education. Particularly notable is her analysis of differences among women as well as similarities in their experiences. Using a sample of 15 adult undergraduate women from three institutions, she assessed the women's self-identity using Kegan's (1982) model of self-development, and then used indepth interviews to elict descriptions of their higher education experiences. While she found that the women identified similar issues in their experiences, how they interpreted and responded to those issues differed considerably according to their developmental stage. We have chosen two issues to illustrate these differences. Women's sense of "voice" was one issue identified by a number of women in Furst's study, and one that is common in other studies of adult women's learning. In Furst's study, voice was discussed literally as the extent to which the women were outspoken in class. Interestingly, in contrast to the image of women as "silent" found in other research on women in higher education (Hayes & Flannery, 1995), the women felt that reentry women students tended to dominate classroom discussions. Women at the Interpersonal stage of Kegan's developmental scheme (who primarily define themselves in relation to others) tended to feel ambivalent about their tendency to speak out in class discussions. They expressed concerns about being judged as selfish or as ignorant by others. In contrast, women at an Institutional stage of development (who make their own "rules;" have a sense of self-definition) were more confident about their participation in discussion. If they chose to monitor their comments, it was to ensure that other students also had the opportunity to express their ideas. A second example concerns the women's perceptions of themselves as "outsiders" in higher

education. Women at the Interpersonal stage linked this feeling to how they felt stripped of their adult status in the student role. However, they expressed feelings of ambivalence, wanting to "fit" into the academic environment as a more traditional student, yet also wanting to maintain their adult status and identity. In contrast, women at the Institututional stage did not experience the same threat to their sense of self. They were better able to locate their personal experiences in a broader institutional context, recognizing - and criticizing - the hierarchy of power relationships affecting faculty as well as students in higher education. They felt more at ease with their outsider status, with less compulsion to adapt or conform to the dominant campus norms.

Connected vs. separate knowing: A reconceptualization. Saltonstall's (1989) dissertation is notable as one of the few studies that attempted to build directly on the work of Belenky et al. (1986). More specifically, she investigated adult women students' preferences for different modes of learning, using the distinction between separate and connected knowing articulated by Belenky et al, as well other conceptualizations of learning style preferences. She collected quantative data from 93 adult women students, along with qualitative data from indepth followup interviews with 17 women. One of the more notable aspects of her findings was her reconceptualization of the separate and connected knowing dichotomy into three patterns of knowing, or what she describes as "learning variations": Attending (roughly equivalent to Belenky et al's connected knowing), Challenging (comparable to separate knowing), and Understanding (a new pattern comprised of elements related to both separate and connected knowing; in particular, it combines responsiveness and empathy with the use of detached logic). Saltonstall suggests that there is a relationship between the women's previous experiences and their learning preferences. She found that the majority of the women (72%) in her study had a preference for the Understanding pattern of learning, which she attributes to their experiences as mothers and also to their enrollment in programs associated with caregiving, such as nursing, social work, and education. She also points out that the women reported using all three learning variations, though one was dominant; in other words, they were not mutually exclusive or dichotomous (as sometimes characterized in other literature).

Minority women in higher education: new perspectives on generativity. Moore's (1990) study is one of the few we located that focused specifically on minority women. Moore completed life histories of eleven minority women who entered higher education as adults. These included black, Native American, and Mexican-American women, as well as one woman of mixed racial background. Her broad purpose was to understand minority women's experiences as reentry students. One theme that emerged from her interviews was the pervasiveness of "a drive to make a better life for the next generation" as a source of motivation for the women's participation in higher education. She relates this to Erikson's concept of generativity, but suggests that it was not linked to a particular stage of life for these women. Instead, it evolved as a motivating factor throughout the women's lives, beginning with the women's desires to fulfill their parents' aspirations for their success, followed by the women's desire to provide a

better life for their own children, and finally to help improve the situation of their people and to preserve their cultural heritage. Religious and spiritual beliefs were important motivating factors for the black and Native American women. Education was seen by the women as a way to achieve their spiritual purpose in life. Interestingly, the author claims that low self-confidence was not reported by the women as a barrier to their learning, to the extent described in studies of white women. Moore suggests that the minority women in her study had developed higher self-esteem from their successful engagement with significant life challenges, such as poverty and discrimination.

Discussion

The above examples illustrate the potential richness of dissertation research on adult women's learning in higher education. We are still in the process of summarizing and analyzing data from the group of studies as a whole. Our findings thus far suggest the value of women's own stories as a starting point for understanding their learning in higher education. While our analysis is still in progress, we have identified some issues and themes that have implications for further research and practice.

1. One concern is the apparent lack of any coherent line of research on women's learning. While many authors cited the work of Belenky et al, as we noted above, only two studies built directly on or extended this work. We found a similar lack in the published research on women's learning (Hayes & Flannery, 1995). A systematic line of research on other aspects of women's learning was also lacking. Much of the literature cited by dissertation authors was not specific to adult women's learning, and a number used concepts and theories derived from male perspectives and experiences. This may be due to the few studies that have focused on adult women in higher education. There seems to be a clear need for research that contributes to the development of a more coherent conceptual and empirical knowledge base specific to adult women's learning.

2. A second concern relates to the analytic methods used in the majority of the studies we examined. Few authors provided what we would describe as a "gendered analysis" of women's learning experiences. They provided rich descriptive information and themes concerning women's learning, but typically did not interpret these findings in terms of the influence of gender. This may be reflective of the limited use of feminist scholarship as a conceptual framework in these studies. New - as well as more experienced - researchers of women's learning may need to become more cognizant of how to incorporate a gendered analysis into their studies.

3. Not surprisingly, the few studies involving women of color suggest that their experiences, perspectives, and motivations may differ in significant ways from those of white women. There is a clear need for further research that involves more diverse groups of adult women. In addition to women of color, these might include lesbian women, disabled women, and other typically unrepresented groups.

4. Findings from the dissertation research reinforce some common themes in the published literature on adult women's learning. However, there are also some intriguing

challenges and contradictions to popular beliefs. For example, a popular assertion is that women tend to be "silent" in classroom discussions due to self-doubts and low confidence. In contrast, as we described above, the women in Furst's (1994) study described themselves as outspoken. Interestingly, some deliberately chose to be "silent" out of consideration for other students, rather than due to low confidence.

5. Other studies highlight aspects of women's learning that have received little attention in the literature. For example, Horowitz (1994) describes how the women in her study developed a "passion" for knowledge, how learning became a "love affair" for them. One woman's words illustrate this passion: "I just have a thirst to learn, and that's something new about me. I's more intense now. I wish I could devote my life to just learning" (p. 130). Other research has given little attention to the emotional intensity of learning for women. In addition, this finding offers a more positive, growth-oriented image of adult women learners than is typically found in research that emphasizes their low confidence, lack of voice, or struggles to cope with other barriers to learning.

6. In terms of practical implications, one theme that has emerged across studies is adult women's experience of being an "outsider" in higher education. While adult women represent a sizeable proportion of higher education students, many institutions still are not responsive to their needs and concerns. Clearly, women's voices and perspectives on their learning should have a more central place in the academy, both in scholarship and practice.

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